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CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS

ANNCR ITALY'S EMBATTLED CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS HELD A CONGRESS AT WHICH SEVERAL FUNDAMENTAL DECISIONS WERE TAKEN. VOA'S ROME CORRESPONDENT DAVID LENT, HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE: THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS WENT INTO THEIR THIRTEENTH PARTY CONGRESS LAST WEEK IN DISARRAY. THEY EMERGED THIS WEEK BITTERLY DIVIDED, BUT IN A POSITION TO OVERCOME THE DIVISIONS. THE OFTEN RAUCUS, DISORDERLY CONGRESS SETTLED SEVERAL FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS. IT WENT ON RECORD WITH THE ENDORSEMENT OF ALL FACTIONS, REJECTING ANY KIND OF GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE WITH THE COMMUNISTS. THIS MEANS THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS REMAIN UNRECEPTIVE TO THE HISTORIC COMPROMISE REPEATEDLY ADVOCATED BY COMMUNIST LEADER ENRICO BERLINGUER.

THE CONGRESS AT THE SAME TIME, ABANDONED ITS EARLIER POLICY OF OPEN AND CLEAR-CUT CONFRONTATION WITH THE COMMUNISTS. INSTEAD, IT ADOPTED A POLICY OF COMPETITIVE DIALOGUE WITH ITALY'S NUMBER TWO PARTY. THE DRAMATIC STRUGGLES BETWEEN THE FORCES BACKING PARTY SECRETARY BENIGNO ZACCAGNINI AND THOSE BACKING HIS RIVAL, DEFENSE MINISTER ARNALDO FORLANI, INVOLVED DIFFERENCES OVER HOW TO APPLY THE NEW POLICY. MISTER ZACCAGNINI WHO WAS RE-ELECTED SECRETARY BY A SLIGHT MAJORITY OVER MISTER FORLANI, STRESSED THE NEED TO ATTRACT VOTERS ON THE LEFT BY BROADENING THE PARTY'S APPEAL BY ENGAGING VIGOROUSLY IN A COMPETITIVE DIALOGUE WITH THE COMMUNISTS ON THE VITAL ISSUES FACING ITALY. MISTER FORLANI WAS INCLINED TO ATTRACT VOTERS BY PROVIDING AN IDENTIFIABLE AND CLEAR-CUT DEMONSTRATION OF OPPOSITION TO ANY FORM OF COOPERATION WITH THE COMMUNISTS.

THE VIGOR WITH WHICH THE BATTLE WAS FOUGHT HAS A POSITIVE SIDE. THE PARTY WAS CLEARLY SHOWN TO BE ALIVE AND OUT OF THE

DOLDRUMS IN WHICH IT FOUND ITSELF AFTER LAST JUNE'S ELECTION LOSSES TO THE COMMUNISTS AND SOCIALISTS. ALSO, THERE WAS A DEMONSTRATION OF PRESSURE FROM YOUNGER PARTY MEMBERS FOR CHANGE, AND SOME MEMBERS OF THE OLD GUARD WERE JEERED OFF THE PODIUM.

THE PARTY'S NATIONAL COUNCIL WHICH MEETS WITHIN TWENTY DAYS TO HAMMER OUT POLICIES, HAS FEW NEW FACES. THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS ARE NOW UNDER GREAT PRESSURE TO PROVE THEY CAN OVERCOME THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE ZACCAGHINI AND THE FORLANI FORCES.

EARLY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ARE NOW CONSIDERED LESS LIKELY.

NONETHELESS, CRUCIAL LOCAL ELECTIONS ARE SCHEDULED IN JUNE. A COMMUNIST TAKEOVER OF ROME, SEAT OF THE VATICAN, IS NOT CONSIDERED ENTIRELY IMPOSSIBLE. IN THAT CASE THE ADVERSE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY, WHICH IS CLOSELY ALLIED WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH WOULD BE ENORMOUS. ALSO, ANY CONFIRMATION IN THE LOCAL ELECTIONS OF THE TRENDS OF LAST JUNE'S REGIONAL ELECTIONS WOULD DEAL A BLOW TO CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC EFFORTS TO TURN THE TIDE.

LAST JUNE, THE COMMUNISTS CAME WITHIN TWO PERCENTAGE POINTS OF EQUALLING CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC STRENGTH. THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS TOOK SOME IMPORTANT DECISIONS AT THEIR CONGRESS. BUT THEY MUST STILL PROVE THEY CAN TRANSLATE THESE INTO POPULARITY AT THE POLLS.